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Accompany a Student

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When I first met Matthew he struck me as the antitheses of the recalcitrant adolescent. He is a soft spoken individual who behaves very well in class, never speaks out of turn, and addresses his instructors respectfully. As I observed Matthew, however, I realized that his behavior was born not from quietude but from timidity. Matthew is a senior at Century, but carries himself much like the freshman who is a little scared and frankly bewildered by his new high school surroundings. Matthew is one of those wayward students who became lost in the throng his freshman year, never developing ownership of any specific identity, vacillating between various performances, and ultimately settling on a state of limbo, neither popular nor ridiculed, merely unnoticed. Matthew does not involve himself in school activities aside from band (in which he lettered) and spends as much time as possible lost in imaginative realms. He reads the Harry Potter books during silent reading in class, talks often about online RPG, and spends his lunch hour playing fantasy card games. From my day spent with Matthew I glimpsed a high school experience that was frankly depressing, isolated, and lonely.

I spent the first period with Matthew in Sr. English (which also happens to be the classroom of my CT). The lesson was somewhat boring, which the teacher warned that it would be since the students were required to copy down extensive notes on topic sentences, supporting evidence, and close analysis. As they copied each line from a PowerPoint presentation they used crayons to color code their notes. As the lesson progressed Matthew whispered under his breath “too fast” or “slow down” as he struggled to keep pace with the rest of the class. To be clear, it’s not that Matthew was writing slowly, only that the instructor was moving through the notes too quickly. After an hour or so we paused and I stood up to pass back the essays I had graded for the class. During this time I lost sight of Matthew as I discussed with the class the various errors that had popped up in their essays and went over a few grammar issues. Though I think grammar is dreadfully boring, they had all requested in their essays that we go over some grammar rules and I obliged them. I kept the lesson lively and they all seemed to enjoy it – at the very least I saw several looks of comprehension as I went over the difference between “then” and “than” as well as subject/verb agreement. After my presentation the class ended and I accompanied Matthew to his second period drama class. As we walked through the halls he thanked me for expressing my opinion and complained that too often teachers at Century engage in a “teacher” role which is largely an affectation and neglect (or refuse) to ever inject their own personality into the lessons. I asked him to explain further, but he said that he couldn’t, only that his general sense was that teachers are somehow afraid to express their opinions about the subject matter they teach.

Matthew seemed to be engaged in his drama class, although the majority of the class was taken up by the students mounting the stage, reciting (or rather, butchering) 6 lines from *Hamlet*, and then resuming their seats. *And this went on, and on, and o*n – the same 6 lines, over 35 times. I began to seriously ponder Hamlet’s assessment of the benefits of suicide, which grew ever more persuasive as the litany continued. I couldn’t speak to Matthew during this process because the instructor insisted on absolute silence during the proceedings. The instructor then took the stage and, looking straight down and at me said, “Dude, you really want to go into teaching? Do you know what purgatory is? This is purgatory. You finish high school and you feel pretty good about yourself. Then you go to college and you feel even better. Then you get into graduate school and finish that, and now you’re feeling really good, all the while hoping for a little respect and a little money, but instead you get this. The problems don’t change. The faces do, every year its new faces, but the problems are always the same.” I remember it precisely. I was taken aback and all I could think to do was smile and nod. The students seemed amused; I didn’t know what to think. What surprised me most was not that he felt that way, but that he would say so in front of his students, standing on a raised stage no less. I asked Matthew if the instructor often acted that way, and he said that no, it really depended on the day. Matthew just figured that the teacher was having a bad week, “And some teachers let it go better than others” he offered sagely.

We then went to Matthew’s third period Applied Web Design class. During this class the instructor sat at his desk trying to get an HTML capture to work (whatever that is) while Matthew showed me some of the video games he was designing. For the first time that day, Matthew seemed to really show an interest in the topic. I asked him if he wanted to design video games when he got out of high school and he said that his intention was to attend ITT Tech and get a job working for a family friend who had some connections in the gaming industry. For all of Matthew’s awkwardness in the hallways, his practice turning his imagination inward towards those fantasy realms he so enjoyed occupying seemed to put him one step ahead of everyone else in this class.

After a somewhat grueling 90 minute period (during which the instructor never did get his HTML thingy to work) we headed to lunch. Matthew and I joined three of his friends at a table where they launched into a role-playing fantasy card game that reminded me of *Lord of the Rings*. I tried to engage them in conversation, but they were totally engrossed in the game. I tried to glean the rules, but finally just gave up and watched as I waited for lunch to end. As we headed out of the cafeteria Matthew apologized for not talking, but explained that the game required a good deal of concentration and that I wouldn’t understand, but that he would give me a detailed tutorial if I wanted. I assured him that I didn’t mind watching, and that no, I would not require a tutorial. The final period of the day was a study hall during which I was not allowed to speak to Matthew as it might disturb the other students (who were all talking loudly anyway). Not being able to talk to Matthew, I headed back up to my CT and we discussed some plans for next week. I met Matthew once more as the final bell rang and thanked him for letting me shadow him.

As I walked out towards my car I thought about how Matthew did not blend well with the traditional model of education where students sit in a classroom and must participate with their instructor and their peers, but he thrived when the interface was nothing but the computer and his own mind. I think that schools such as Century, which rely very much on the traditional model of secondary education, do not work well for students such as Matthew who do not have many of the 40 developmental assets. (When I asked Matthew about his home life he said that his parents were largely apathetic – provided he attended school and didn’t get into trouble, they left him to his own devices). In many ways, though, I wonder if the world is changing so drastically that the 40 developmental assets will not be as crucial as they may once have been. Matthew, for example, is perfectly happy to sit in front of a computer and earn $18 an hours writing code for video games. And if he’s happy, who can argue with that?